SYNOPSIS

A STUDY OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: INSIGHTS FROM THE WEST BENGAL EXPERIENCE

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By

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Introduction

Disempowerment of women are deep-rooted problems in India. Unfortunately, women in India are subject to discriminations in different dimensions of their lives from childhood despite legislative measures and women centric policy directives by the Governments. Our performance regarding women's empowerment is abysmally poor in global indices. India's Gender Development Index is the third lowest in Asia after Afghanistan and Pakistan, much lower than smaller countries like Nepal, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka in 2023-24 (World Bank, 2024). Therefore, we need to identify the dimensions where our women are lagging behind at the national level and at the regional level for framing the further gender development programs.

Recognizing the immense importance of empowering women across the globe, United Nations has come up with a number of legislations and action plans since the 1990s, in forums like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the Cairo Programme for Action (2019). United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (2000) and the latest Sustainable Development Goals (2015) has kept women's empowerment as one of the targeted agenda of accomplishments. In order to explore the gendered dimension of development at the national level, Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII) by UNDP, Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) by World Economic Forum, Social Institution and Gender Index (SIGI) by OECD and Gender Equity Index (GEI) by Social Watch are being reported annually. However, no universally accepted Women's Empowerment Index has been formulated yet. All the existing indices use aggregate data hence cannot be decomposed by different socio-demographic groups and sub-national levels. Moreover, these indices fail to measure empowerment at the individual level and inequalities within and between the groups. Majority studies has measured women's empowerment at the individual level either considering one indicator or conducting principal component analysis of the indicators for constructing the index. However, these measures fail to provide a straight forward interpretation and do not obey the good properties of deprivation/achievement index. This dissertation has been designed to estimate a Women's Multidimensional Disempowerment Index (WMDI) for India which has a clear-cut interpretation and good properties necessary for alleviating women's disempowerment in India. In order to provide an insight from West Bengal we have estimated WMDI and analyzed its properties for two selected districts.

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Literature Review and Motivation

Studies on empowerment of women gained momentum after the seminal work of Kabeer (1999) which emphasized upon three dimensions of women's empowerment- resources (means which enable a person to be empowered), agency (autonomy within oneself to take independent decisions) and achievements (outcome or realization of empowerment). Review of literature suggests selection of indicators of empowerment depend on the context and relevance of the study, be it sector-specific indices (Alkire et al., 2013; Narayanan et al., 2019; Galie et al., 2019; Malapit et al., 2019) or non-sectoral indices (Phan, 2016; Richardson, 2018; Ewerling et al., 2020). Domains like household decision making power, control over use of income, access to family income, freedom of movement, attitude towards gender norms and views about intimate partner violence are some widely used indicators of empowerment in South Asian context (Acharya et al., 2010 ; Akram, 2018; Adhikari, 2016; Nath & Das, 2024). These dimensions have practical and theoretical implications for Indian context as well and has been incorporated in formulating the disempowerment index in our study.

However, any measure of deprivation should be sensitive with the inequality. Although a number of poverty measures are proposed which are adjusted to be sensitive to inequality , but the limitation of these measures is that they are developed at the cost of sacrificing the sub-group decomposition property (Chakravorty & D'Ambrsio, 2006 and Rippin, 2012). To this end, Seth & Alkire, 2014 propose a new decomposable inequality measure which is a positive multiple of variance. This measure can decompose inequality among the disempowered into within group and between group inequality and can also capture disparity in disempowerment across population sub-groups.

Empowerment of women has an intrinsic human rights target that ensures well-being of children (Carlson et al., 2015; Afridi et al., 2016; Nath & Das, 2024). However, the better developmental outcome for children as a consequence of empowerment is gender-biased. Mother's higher decision making power may favourably affect the boy child more than the girl child (Durrant & Sathar, 2000; Chakraborty & De, 2011) and vise-versa (Duflo, 2000; Duflo, 2012;Qian, 2008; Jayachandran & Lleras-Muney,2009; Luz & Agadjanian ,2015) India is a country characterized with strong son preference. Son preference and daughter neglect of mother depends on individual factors (education, employment, earning in cash), household factors (household wealth , housing quality, ownership of land, sex of her older siblings, family structure) and societal factors (religion, caste, marriage exogamy, village infrastructure) (Pande

& Malhotra, 2006; Pande & Astone, 2007). There is dearth of research which explores the causal relationship between multidimensional disempowerment and multidimensional deprivation of a girl child. Our study aims to bridge the gap and examines the association between girl child deprivation and mother's disempowerment among the surveyed women.

Empowerment is a concept of achievement towards development. But in policy perspectives researchers and policy makers emphasize more on the level of disempowerment or lack of freedoms that needs to be reduced for accelerating the process of development. With this end in view this study has been designed for analyzing the incidence, intensity and inequality of disempowerment of women in India and in West Bengal.

Spatial heterogeneity is an integral part of disempowerment analysis and there are ample literature that discuss inter-regional disparity (Rettig et al., 2020; Rettig & Hijman, 2022; Porter, 2020). Still, studies are rare that discuss inter-district variation in women's disempowerment especially in Indian context.

Further, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study that assesses the impact of mother's disempowerment on the intra-household gender-based discriminations faced by the girl child. Our study tries to bridge these research gaps and contributes in these pertinent areas of gender and development discourse.

Objectives

Based on the above-mentioned research gaps, our study makes the following objectives:

First, we do a comparative analysis of the states and find out the relative position of West Bengal with respect to empowerment of women in various indicators at the state level.

Second, we explore the incidence, intensity, sub-group decomposition and inequality decomposition of women's disempowerment in India and then examine the position of West Bengal compared with the national level disempowerment of women. An intertemporal analysis is performed to understand the changing patterns of disempowerment and disempowerment inequality between 4^{th} and 5^{th} rounds of NFHS.

Third, we have examined the effect of disempowerment of mothers on son preference at the national level as well as in West Bengal.

Fourth, we report the multidimensional deprivation of women's disempowerment in two districts of West Bengal based on the primary survey and find whether disempowerment varies with regional backwardness.

Fifth, we explore whether mother's multidimensional disempowerment has any influence on girl child's multidimensional deprivation at household level in the study districts.

Methodology and Data

In chapter one we have constructed ***State Level Women Empowerment Index (SWEI)*** which is an achievement index using geomantic mean of the empowerment indicators reported in NFHS. In order to explore the similarity and dissimilarity of the states in respect of women's empowerment cluster analysis has been conducted.

In chapter two we have formulated Women's Multidimensional Disempowerment Index (WMDI) using eighteen indicators under five dimensions namely 'familial dimension', 'economic dimension', 'mobility freedom dimension', 'access to hygiene dimension' and 'perception towards domestic violence' for the nation and for West Bengal. We have used Alkire & Foster (2011) method for constructing WMDI and performed sub-group decomposition and indicator wise decomposition, which are the core issues of policy assessments and implementations to reduce women's disempowerment. In order to study the incidence of disempowerment we use dual cut-off methodology following Alkire and Foster (2011). The first cut-off identifies if a woman is deprived in a specific indicator and then the second cut-off identifies whether a woman is multi-dimensionally disempowered or not. At first, we examine whether each woman is deprived in each of the indicator or not. If the indictors are binary in nature, we attach the value either '0' or '1'. If i^{th} woman responses 'no' for j^{th} indicator then the woman is deprived in terms of j^{th} disempowerment indicator. We attach value '1' for deprivation status D_{ij} i.e. $D_{ij} = 1$ when i^{th} woman responses 'no' for j^{th} indicator and '0' otherwise.

We compute the disempowerment score using NFHS data which is the weighted sum of the indicators where equal weightage is given to each dimension and indicators within each dimension receives equal weight.

Table 2.3.2 Selected Indicators of Women's Disempowerment and their Assigned Weights

Dimension	Disempowerment Criteria (D_i)	Wi
Familial Dimension	Can't decide on her own healthcare	1/20
	Can't participate in decision regarding household purchase	1/20
	Can't decide to visit to relatives/friends	1/20
	Can't decide regarding contraceptive use	1/20
Asset Ownership	Don't have house ownership	1/10
	Don't have land ownership	1/10
Freedom of Mobility Dimension	Don't allow to go to the market alone	1/20
	Don't allow to go to the health facility	1/20
	Don't allow to the places outside the locality	1/20
	Don't have personal mobile phone	1/20
Access to Hygiene	Don't have access to hygienic toilet	1/15
	Don't have access to clean water	1/15
	Don't have access to clean fuel	1/15
Perception towards Intimate Partner Violence	Justifies intimate partner violence when wife goes out without permission	1/25
	Justifies intimate partner violence when wife neglects child	1/25
	Justifies intimate partner violence when wife argues with husband	1/25
	Justifies intimate partner violence when wife refuses sex	1/25
	Justifies intimate partner violence when wife burns food	1/25

The association between son preference and mother's disempowerment has been reported through correlation analysis, at the national level as well as in West Bengal in chapter three. The significance of intertemporal changes in desire for more child and mother's disempowerment between the 4^{th} and 5^{th} round of NFHS is done through pair-wise t test. This chapter, most importantly, evaluates the impact of mother's disempowerment on the son preference after addressing the endogeneity problem in the econometric model through Recursive Bivariate Probit Model (RBPM).

Chapter four analyses the district level disempowerment primarily in two districts of West Bengal namely Howrah district and Jalpaiguri district which are socio-economically heterogenous. A multistage random sampling method is applied for collecting data from urban and rural centres in both districts with a sample of 800 respondent women, aged 15-49, altogether. Apart from constructing traditional index comparable with NFHS data based index, another index is created incorporating a new dimension of 'civic empowerment' using additional information gathered from the survey.

In chapter five first we formulate Girl Child Discrimination Index (GCDI) where the dimensions of discrimination considered are 'discrimination in healthcare and nutrition', 'discrimination in education', 'deprivation in hygiene and safety', 'deprivation in social

inclusion as a child' and 'discrimination in love and care'. A girl child is considered deprived in a specific indicator if and only if the boys from the same household is receiving that service but that service is withdrawn from the girls except the dimension of 'deprivation in hygiene and safety' and 'deprivation in social inclusion as a child'. The indicators under 'discrimination in healthcare and nutrition' are protein intake and medical help-seeking; under 'discrimination in education' the indicators are school drop-out and expectation of household work before and after study hours; under ' deprivation in hygiene and safety' dimension the indicator is lack of access to feminine hygiene during menstruation; 'deprivation in social inclusion as a child' dimension includes the indicators of child labour and child marriage and the fifth dimension 'discrimination in love and care' incorporates discrimination in birthday celebration and discrimination in giving importance to opinions. In fifth chapter we pursue the analysis of disempowerment-discrimination relation among the surveyed households where there are at least one girl child and one boy child in the age group of 6-18.

Secondary source of data: To compute and compare the degree of women's empowerment across the states, we have collected data on the indicators of women's empowerment from state reports, state fact sheets and micro-level data of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-20 and 2015-16. In order to compute women's disempowerment index, we have used unit level data from the NFHS, 4th round (2015-16) and 5th round (2019-21) for currently married women aged between 15-49 years. Since the disempowerment index in our study covers the indicators from domestic violence module, we use the weight applied for domestic violence, making a weighted sample of 40,221 in NFHS-5 and 32,218 in NFHS-4. For the similar decomposition analysis of disempowerment in West Bengal, the sample size is 1,433 and 1,110 respectively in NFHS-5 and NFHS-4.

For studying the effect of mother's disempowerment on son preference at the national level as well as in West Bengal, we have considered mothers with two children and mothers with two daughters from NFHS-5. The sample size of mothers with two children are 21, 295 and mothers with two daughters are 2,565 at all India level. The corresponding figures for West Bengal are 776 and 125 respectively.

Primary source of data: Instead of incorporating a reasonably large set of empowerment indicators of women, NFHS data does not provide any information on women's civic empowerment. Moreover, one objective of this dissertation is to assess the effect of mothers' disempowerment on girl-child deprivation. For performing the comparative analysis of

disempowerment in two districts of West Bengal, and for finding the causal relation between women's disempowerment and deprivation faced by a girl child at household level, a door-to-door primary survey has been performed in Howrah district from Southern zone and Jalpaiguri district from Northern zone during February 2022 and October 2023. Four hundred households have been surveyed both from Howrah district and Jalpaiguri district making the total sample size of 800 households. For disempowerment-discrimination analysis, after filtering the data with our required pre-conditions for analysis, the sample size is 118.

Major Findings

Our state level analysis in chapter one reports that rank of West Bengal's in respect of the level of women's empowerment was seventeenth in 2015-16 which has slipped to eighteenth in 2019-20, revealing a relative moderate performance in both rounds.

Our study in chapter two explores that 51 percent of Indian women in reproductive age are disempowered in 2019-20, while in West Bengal 56 per cent of women are disempowered. Compared to 2015-16, in 2019-21 the incidence of disempowerment has reduced. The intensity of disempowerment in India (West Bengal) also reduces to 0.48 (0.49) in 2019-21 which was 0.49(0.51) in 2015-16. Women's Multidimensional Disempowerment Index (WMDI) of India (West Bengal) comes out to be 0.249(0.282) in 2019-21 which was 0.306(0.303) in 2015-16. Therefore, women from West Bengal are more disempowered compared to the national average, driven by higher incidence and intensity of disempowerment. Dimension-wise decomposition reveals that lack of asset ownership has the highest contribution in the national level and state level WMDI during the 5^{th} round of NFHS followed by freedom of movement. Decomposition of disempowerment across population sub-groups reveal notable similarities between the nation and the state. The highest burden of disempowerment is borne by illiterate women, by the youngest age groups, by the non-working class, the poorest class, whose husbands who are agricultural workers, the women who are Muslims and who reside in rural areas both nationally as well as in West Bengal. However, there are dissimilarities too. While ST women are most disempowered at all India level, OBC women face highest disempowerment in West Bengal. Assessing inequality in women's disempowerment in India and West Bengal we find that population sub-groups which have highest incidence or intensity of disempowerment does not necessarily bear highest inequality among the disempowered. For example, inequality in disempowerment is the highest for women with the highest educational

achievement, the sub-group which has the lowest degree of disempowerment among all educational sub-groups during NFHS-5. However, the major difference between national and state level disempowerment is that while inequality at the national level has decreased overall (0.162 to 0.117), it has increased in West Bengal (from 0.152 to 0.186) in between the two rounds of NFHS. In India and in West Bengal, within group inequality dominates the inequality of disempowerment among the disempowered women. A notable finding of inequality decomposition is that the inequality disparity is the highest across wealth classes among all sub-national decomposition both nationally and in West Bengal.

Chapter three finds that although mother's desire for more child and disempowerment has no significant association nationally or in West Bengal but each indicator of disempowerment is strongly associated with fertility preference during 5th round of NFHS at all India level.
The t test suggests that although state level disempowerment has declined significantly from 2015-16 to 2019-21, unfortunately the state level decline in son preference is insignificant during the same period. The chapter further analyses the effect of disempowerment on son preference for the women in India and in West Bengal. Our study finds that women's disempowerment is a strong determinant for the wish to have more children among the mothers with two children as well as mothers with two daughters at national level and also in West Bengal. A disempowered woman is expected to be highly influenced by cultural and social norms and cannot overcome the gendered stereotypes (Stewart et al., 2021). Economic dependence of mothers on their sons specially in their old ages, acceptance of husbands and other in-laws' wishes regarding family size and composition, lack of awareness about own health and child health leading to lack of reproductive autonomy and higher social status of a son's mother are the important channels causing son preference among disempowered mothers.

Empirical analysis in chapter four suggests that Howrah district from Southern zone and Jalpaiguri district from Northern zone which vary widely in their socio-economic characteristics, have different degrees of incidence (0.83 in Howrah district and 0.69 in Jalpaiguri district) and intensity (0.56 in Howrah district and 0.47 in Jalpaiguri district). WMDI for Howrah district is 0.46 which is 0.33 for Jalpaiguri district if we consider traditional indicators of disempowerment only. If we consider survey-based additional indicators disempowerment scenario further aggravates in both districts. 94 percent women from Howrah district and 69 percent women from Jalpaiguri district are now disempowered. The intensity of disempowerment is now 0.56 and 0.47 respectively. The disempowerment index becomes 0.51

and 0.33 for Howrah district and Jalpaiguri district respectively. Thus, women from economically more developed region are more disempowered considering both types of disempowerment indices. The women who are illiterate, who belong from the youngest age group, who are non-working, who are the poorest, who are scheduled caste are most disempowered in both districts. The incidence, intensity and the value of disempowerment index are higher in the rural region compared to the urban region in both districts. Thus, close affinity in disempowerment characteristics across sub-groups is revealed in the study. The indicator wise decomposition analysis suggests that in both districts lack of asset ownership is the biggest deterrent towards achieving empowerment considering traditional index of disempowerment while lack of civic empowerment emerges to be the biggest disempowerment contributor if survey-based index is considered. Further, disempowerment inequality decomposition reveals that the degree of inequality is higher in Jalpaiguri district despite having lower disempowerment than Howrah district. One remarkable finding from district level inequality analysis is that disparity in inequality is the highest across the wealth classes- the analysis thus reveals that wealth class wise disempowerment disparity is unanimously the highest -be it at the national level, at the state level or at the district level.

Chapter five reveals that girl children are most disempowered in access to hygiene and safety during menstruation both in Howrah district and Jalpaiguri district. Further, girls face the harshest level of discrimination if both parents are illiterate, who are from ST community and are non-Hindus. Note that these are the subgroups where mothers are most disempowered also. Further, regression analysis after addressing for endogeneity problem finds that disempowerment of mother has a strong positive effect on the deprivation faced by a girl child. A mother, when gets empowered, has better autonomy in day-to-day household activities and higher decision-making power in investment in human capital in terms of education, nutrition and healthcare and takes instrumental role in providing a gender-neutral resource allocation.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The study finds the varying degrees of disempowerment across various sub-nationals in India and in West Bengal through sub-decomposition analysis. There should not be a generalized policy approach across different layers of society as burden of disempowerment varies across population sub-groups. As the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of women are found

to have higher degrees of disempowerment, it is recommended to create need based target-oriented policies to these identified groups of women.

The findings from our study reflects the abysmal scenario of lack of asset ownership as it has the highest contribution to the WMDI at the national and sub-national level. Freedom of movement emerges as the second strongest contributor to disempowerment. A number of policies and laws are implemented to promote equal rights for women since independence. However, as long as women's gender perception do not change, implementation of acts and policies will not deliver targeted outcome. More programmes like Nari Shakti Puraskar need to be designed to honour the achievements of women in various fields. However as long as patriarchal attitude in providing property ownership does not change only policies can not serve any purpose. Further, women themselves have to be more aware about their own property rights and its long term financial implications as they provide financial independence to women. Freedom of mobility is one of the most important but easily restricted rights of women. In India, women's freedom of movement is severely restricted due to stringent patriarchal norms, as well as lack of safety and security issues for women. Restricted movement of girls and women is a form of control imposed on women in our patrilocal culture and reduces women's agency significantly (Mehta & Sai, 2021). Restriction in movement leads to lack of educational achievement, loss of access to job market and lack of access to healthcare services ((Asi, 2021). Ensuring more safety of women in public transport and other places, early verdict against any kind of crime against women and most importantly creating respectful mind towards women may be instrumental in increasing women's freedom of mobility and help them make strategic decisions of their lives on their own.

Inequality of disempowerment reveals that total within group inequality has majority share while between group inequality share is miniscule in disempowerment inequality among the disempowered women in both national level and state level. Hence, policy makers should be more careful to formulate policies to reduce disempowerment variation within a particular subgroup's disempowered women if they want to reduce overall disempowerment inequality. Further, as disparity in disempowerment comes out to be the highest across wealth classes, the economically vulnerable women should be targeted to make empowered to enhance empowerment of women of the entire society.

Girl child's deprivation is revealed strongly associated with mother's disempowerment in our study. Thus, if the policy makers effectively formulate policies to reduce disempowerment of

mothers, it is also expected to reduce the girl child's deprivation in a ripple effect. Breaking the social stigma, ensuring a safe and secure environment for women would not only promote empowerment of women, it would also make a leap forward towards lower discrimination towards girl child and help us to achieve the sustainable development goals for gender equity both for the women (SDG-5) and the girl children (SDG-2, SDG-3, SDG-4) in a comprehensive manner.

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